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ABSTRACT

A variety of marketing strategies can be used to maintain and increase community college enrollments. First, marketing research can be conducted to find out about the college's real and perceived image; to get a clearer picture of the lifestyles, attitudes, and interests of its clientele; and to target adult groups who are seeking educational and employment skills and who might not have been previously targeted as potential enrollees. Potential target groups include professionals employed part-time who are often offered incentives including tuition reimbursement or compensatory time by their employers; the older nontraditional student who may need special counseling services to make a formal educational commitment; and high school seniors who may be encouraged to attend college by various types of articulation agreements between the high school and college. Along with the new and expanded audiences, different site locations (e.g., hospitals, fire stations, shopping malls, and libraries) should be considered as a way of attracting potential clients. Administrators should also review the possibility of giving coupons, discount offers, gift certificates, or play/concert tickets as bonus incentives to encourage enrollment. A publicity theme, reflecting the institution's mission and specific program, should also be highlighted in a coordinated public relations approach. Action, leadership, and institutional commitment are essential to break the boundaries in the competition for students in the coming years. (AYC)

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POLICY ISSUES AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE:

ESSAYS BY FELLOWS

IN THE MID-CAREER FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

AT PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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RECRUITMENT OF STUDENTS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Because of the end of the baby boom, there is a significant enrollment decline in the number of traditional high school graduates in the 18 to 21-year old category. As a consequence of this decrease in what used-to-be the usual target audience for enrollment at the post-secondary level, community college administrators are concerned with attracting and retaining students. In the State of New Jersey enrollment per capita is the basis for funding so it is therefore the utmost importance that community colleges find and attract students to maintain the funding conduit from the State. This paper will explore some of the innovative marketing strategies in the current literature with the view to maintain and increase enrollment. Some of the questions to be explored are:

- What innovative strategies and activities might be pursued to acquire students?
- What target populations, rather than traditional high school graduates, should a recruitment plan focus?
- What internal improvements in the way of innovative programming, scheduling and retention of students already recruited will vitally assist to increase enrollment?

Ihlanfeldt (1980) defined <u>marketing</u> in the following way:

> Marketing is a methodology that permits decision makers in any organization to think systematically and sequentially about the mission of the organization, the services or products it offers, the markets it currently serves, and the extent to which these same markets and possibly new ones may demand its products or services in the future.

If we apply the broader meaning of this concept to enrollment strategy at the community college, can we glean any applicability for the not-for-profit sector from the for-profit sector? Can we bridge the gap from the commercial to the non-profit area while enhancing the community college's image of providing low-

cost education with a high quality of excellence? Research has revealed that most first-time college students attend a school in their locality rather than attend an out-of-state institution. This assumption, together with the low cost to the student of $350 to $450 per semester tuition, would garner clients from the immediate geographic region for most community colleges if a high caliber of instruction and support services render a positive image.

In order to find out about the college's real and perceived image and potential clients, marketing research must be conducted. By using past and current student demographic and psychographic (lifestyles, attitudes, and interests) data to get a clearer picture of their clientele, college administrators can improve their recruitment efforts. (Miller, p. 7) For example, highlights of the literature search revealed that more college-age women than men are enrolling in college; more high school graduates are delaying college entry for several years; more college students are choosing part-time study. If we use these generalizations, we can look for other target audiences who are worthy of recruitment efforts. Cross (1983) and others suggest directing recruiting efforts to the part-time adult learner. Some adult target groups who are in quest of educational and employment skills and who might not have been previously targeted as potential enrollees are:

- o Women who have pre-school children, provided day care is an incentive.
- o Re-entry homemakers who wish to complete their formal education and/or occupational training.
- o Males changing careers.
- o Senior citizens.
- o Unemployed and underemployed.
- o Welfare recipients.
- o Adults in need of updated or new occupational licensing requirements, such as real estate, banking, nursing, dental or allied health professionals.

Focusing on the part-time adult professional who is employed as an accountant, banker, government employee, medical laboratory technician, this type of potential client is most likely to take advantage of education and training opportunities for upgrading. In many instances, tuition reimbursement, compensatory time, or both are given as incentives by employers. If educational institutions would

form alliances or partnerships with the health and business communities, services to this target population could be expanded. For example, in Columbia, South Carolina, an Education Alliance under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce with 22 educational institutions is viable and growing. (Adult Recruitment Practices, p. 108)

However, the real challenge is the 40 plus nontraditional student, who is difficult to recruit. How do you tap into this potential audience who is very reluctant to make a formal educational commitment? Illustrative of a methodology and prototype of such a program is one found at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. A specially-designed for "adults-only" degree program, using specially trained counselors to work with this target population, could be emulated at the community college level. (Adult Recruitment Practices, pp.123-130)

Another potential audience may still be found in the high school where articulation agreements can be formulated between the community college and the school district. Community college administrators have initiated many innovative programs for college credit as well as remediation; some programs have provided released time for high school seniors to attend the local community college on a part-time basis, Middle College for high-risk disadvantaged high school youth, summer workshops and courses, and so the list goes on.

Along with new and expanded audiences, different site locations, such as hospitals, fire stations, shopping malls, libraries, public housing projects, community centers, should be considered as a way of attracting potential clients to courses. Has the administration explored a mobile van going to industry, business and the local community as a grass-roots approach? As an illustration General Motors in its 1990 marketing strategy for Saturn cars plans to use satellite showrooms in shopping malls and video-display kiosks in high traffic areas in office buildings. Why can't the community college imitate this strategy to expose potential clients to the product (courses, workshops, seminars)?

Looking at the for-profit sector of our economy which seeks to attract potential buyers may give decision makers some new insights about possibilities for marketing techniques outside of education. These eclectic suggestions are offered only as possibilities and can be modified to fit the needs, interests, and mission of the specific institution.

- o Offer promotional "freebies," when and where applicable, such as one free course for every four in which a student registers.
- o Give a free reference book for the first 50 students to enroll.
- o Cive one free course to every adult who registers with a son or daughter.

While recognizing the above promotions can become "gimmicky" as well as non-academic in character, in low-enrollment courses or programs some type of a bonus incentive may make the difference between cancelling the course or having sufficient enrollment to permit the course to run. Administrators should review the possibility of coupons, discount offers, gift certificates, travel or play/concert tickets to stimulate potential consumers to act. AT&T gives credits, discounts, bonuses in its Opportunity Calling Program; why can't the community college?

Miller (1986) feels a publicity theme, reflecting the institution's mission and specific programs should be highlighted. Miller's theme strategy of "An Institution that Cares" or "Employment for the Future" can be carried a step further. I suggest a coordinated public relations approach and formal plan be applied to all publications and marketing efforts. In most instances, a professional will be able to "package" the institution in order to be consistent with its mission. In addition, a strong commitment in the community college's budget should be assigned to marketing activities. Moreover, a cost-benefit analysis of each activity should be undertaken so that the ins titution can make intelligent expenditure decisions on the basis of how much enrollment each dollar will return. In order that the marketing strategy stay current, continuous feedback should be given high priority as conditions change so adjustment can be made when necessary. (Miller, p. 8) For example , certain programs with low enrollment

should be deleted or phased out while new programs having enrollment potential phased in.

Several authors suggest community college administrators compile information and promotional materials on what competitors are using. In the commercial sector, competitors' actions are constantly reviewed, monitored, and analyzed. It seems to me corporations spend millions of marketing research and strategy while community colleges do not seem to realize the necessity of using these approaches to bolster enrollments. I am not suggesting that research and strategy are ignored, but what I am stating is that they are not used to their fullest potential. One of the key questions an administrator could ask: Is our ins titution spending the same amount on marketing research, strategies, activities as a successful competitor institution?

An administrator should be able to make a list, assign priorities, allocate and distribute funds within categories, then review the type of promotions which yield the highest number of enrollees. In order to increase enrollment, administrators have to take reasonable risks with various approaches in order to find new ways of attracting and retaining students. Action, leadership and institutional commitment are essential to break the boundaries in the competition for students in the coming years.

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